

MONOTHEISM is the belief that there is only one God. The term commonly refers to Israel's belief in one God, taken over by the Christian church. Contrasted with animism (worshipping nature spirits), polytheism (recognizing many gods), and henotheism/monolatry (recognizing that many gods exist, but accepting a personal commitment to only one), it then characterizes Israel's religion over against those of other Western Asian peoples, or Israel's religion at its most developed over against its earlier stages.

It needs to be noted, however, that at all periods the OT affirms that Yahweh has unrivalled power and wisdom, and that his being is uniquely unoriginate and eternal. Genesis 1, for instance, describes God's creative activity in absolute terms. Distinguishing him from nature and cosmos, and leaving no room for the existence of other beings of his stature, it subverts the polytheisms of Babylon and Canaan and - by anticipation - the emanations of Gnosticism. Exodus 1 — 15 relates God's redemptive work in similar absolute terms, asserting his power in history and over natural forces in such a way as to imply a claim to an exclusive deity. The Psalms and Job declare that Yahweh is Lord over all forces of chaos and evil and implicitly exclude any metaphysical dualism (cf. Isa 45:7).

At the same time, the OT also accepts the existence of other 'gods' at all periods, though demoting these to the status of Yahweh's aides, beings whose divinity is not absolute as his is (cf. I Cor 8:4-6). The OT does not develop from animism or polytheism to monotheism. Further, some of the OT's monotheistic-sounding affirmations (e.g. Deut 6:4) are primarily concerned to summon Israel to an exclusive commitment to Yahweh; and in general, the distinctive feature of biblical faith is the conviction that the God of Israel who is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is (the one) God, rather than merely that God (whoever he be) is one. This latter belief would in any case not be peculiar to Israel, its clearest expression elsewhere being in Akhenaten's Egypt.

Monotheism became an explicit theological theme in the early Christian centuries in the form of an emphasis on God's *monarchia*. Here the biblical testimony to the unique deity of Israel's redeemer and the Father of Jesus came to be associated with Platonic and Aristotelian convictions regarding the one divine monad. The commingling of biblical and philosophical perspectives made it possible to work out the implications of the scriptural testimony regarding the uniqueness of God, but it also hindered the development of Trinitarian theology. Indeed, the word 'monotheism' in its earliest usage denotes non-Christian or sub-Christian beliefs which contrast with Trinitarianism.

## **Bibliography**

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